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On Marlow's Narrative in *Lord Jim*
— 2 —

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(4)

In this section I would like to see how Marlow carries out the task he is made to undertake. After the tantalizing double disappointment, first by the omniscient narrator who would not convey everything he knows, and secondly by the aborted "I-narrator" who feels himself cut off from human communication, it is natural for the reader to expect the second narrator to come out with the "whole story". Marlow is chosen as the second narrator to tell the "whole story" in his own mode of narration. Being a mere individual, he cannot be omniscient. In fact, he did not know anything about Jim before the inquiry. At first he is not much different from his listeners in that, scandalized by the case of the *Patna* desertion, he gets curious about every circumstance of the desertion. It is by pure chance that he gets personally acquainted with Jim. In order to satisfy his, and later the listeners', curiosity, he has to put together what facts he has picked up from this or that chance acquaintance and reconstruct a circumstantial factual story of the strange case. By a wholly personal approach, he aims at the objectivity and omniscience of the third-person narration. His approach will also be subjective and sympathetic. For it is not only because the *Patna* case is so strange as to be the talk of everyone, but because Marlow gets so deeply interested in Jim as to be sometimes inclined to identify himself with the young man that he undertakes to tell Jim's story. When he reports Jim's, that is,

the first-person's, side of the tale, it will not be with the aloof objectivity of the third-person narrator, but with the responsiveness of a person deeply concerned about and puzzled by Jim's case. Jim's subjective point of view will be corroborated, or refuted by Marlow's subjective—but at the same time objective, in the sense that he is but a third party—point of view.

Marlow's own mode of narration, then, partakes of both the third-person narration and the first-person narration. Conrad suggests by doubly disappointing the reader in the frame and by imposing on Marlow the task of telling the "whole story" that the "whole story" cannot be conveyed either in the omniscient third-person or in the first-person narration, and that it consists not just in the objective facts, but in the facts accumulated, imagined, and thought about by an individual. Marlow's task is a difficult one. He has to get at and convey the objectively justifiable and subjectively convincing interpretation of Jim's case, despite the limitations of being an unprivileged individual. In other words, he has to be a reliable narrator. At the same time he is aware of his difficulty, his limitations and unreliableness. This self-awareness is one element that brings about the intricacy of Marlow's narrative. We will see, then, how he proceeds to his task.

In the last two paragraphs of Chapter 4, the first narrator introduces Marlow's talk in the following words :

> And later on, *many times*, in distant *parts* of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to *remember* Jim, to *remember* Jim at length, in detail and audibly.
>
> *Perhaps* it *would* be after dinner, on a verandah draped in motionless foliage and crowned with flowers, in the deep

> dusk speckled by fiery cigar-ends .... and with the very first word uttered Marlow's body, extened at rest in the seat, *would* become very still, as though his spirit had winged its way back into *the lapse of time* and were speaking through his lips *from the past.* (My italics)

These words, dwelling on Marlow's act of remembrance and establishing the repeated status of his tale, have the effect of pushing Jim's story into a distant past and turning it into a legend. Marlow the storyteller, then, would be like a bard of old days who recited an adventure story of a hero. Even if he talks from his own memory and experience, his talk will bear something of a time-hallowed tone. But once he opens his mouth, in spite of the first narrator's remark, "he would say," his tale does not turn out to be a repeated legendary version, but a version given on a particular occasion. Not privileged with omniscience, nor authorized like a bard, he begins his narrative apologetically by explaining how he is qualified to tell a story of Jim. And all through his talk, he keeps reminding the audience of his unprivileged narrator's status by meticulously revealing the source of every material he came by. In revealing the source, he often appears to stray into a gossip about the person who gave him the information, which lends to his narrative desultoriness of a casual talk. This narration is not a recition of an established legendary version nor a lengthy gossip to which one listens relaxedly "to make time pass away after dinner" (22) as Marlow ironically suggests, but, as Ian Watt says, "a new and intensely committed venture by Marlow at understanding and conveying the full meaning of Jim's story,"[1] or in my words, at telling the "whole story" once for all. Not pretending to the omniscient narrator's privileged access to the minds of other people,

he will plod his seemingly puzzled way among the confessions and reports that have happened to be accumulated on him. The reader is to watch his plodding way and be involved in his concentrated efforts to make sense out of the jumbled materials. The reader is to follow Marlow in his quest for the "whole story", or in other words, to see a story in the making.

The quest, or the making process seems wayward and bewildering to the reader. The final goal is clear enough ; to tell Jim's story and judge him, but Marlow's way sometimes seems to lead nowhere. If he has taken up the take of a storyteller at all, there must be some method or guiding principles in his bewildering way.

The most obvious principle to which every storyteller resorts is to follow the chronological order of events. Marlow is not an exception for all the desultoriness of his narrative. Especially when telling the Patusan part of the story (which is from Chapter 24 on, or the latter half of the subdiscourse B and the whole of C of Fig. 1), Marlow largely observes this principle, with the result that the narrative sequence is far easier to follow here than in the former *Patna* part. There are only two important anticipations in that part. One is Marlow's visit to Patusan two years after Jim's arrival there, to witness his perilously achieved success. The other is his chance meeting with the dying Gentleman Brown who tells him with grotesque triumph of the disaster he caused in Patusan ; the story reminds Marlow of an unexpected encounter with the refugees from Patusan at Stein's residence several months ago. These anticipations are intended to explain the circumstances in which he gained information about Jim in Patusan ; another instance of Marlow's consciousness of being a non-privileged narrator. It is ture that in explaining the circumstance, he lets his audience have some snatches of the

Patusan story, but instead of continuing to puzzle them with jumbled information, he turns to telling them a considerably straightforward story of Jim's success and his disaster which he has reconstucted from the materials. As I have noted above,[2] this way of telling a story suits the needs of the after-dinner audience and the addressee of the letter, for they have no previous knowledge about Patusan, nor about what happened to Jim after his departure.

There is, however, some difference in the manner of reconstruction between Marlow's spoken narrative of his visit to Patusan, and his written report of the diaster. In the former, he reconstructs Jim's two years, not only from what he heard directly from the persons concerned, Jim, Jewel, Cornelius and others, but from what he saw and perceived in person, standing on the spots where the various events had taken place in the important two-year period in the history of Patusan. He is like a writer of a documentary who aims to write a history in the making, piecing together what he sees and hears on the very site, imagining what really happened, and revealing at the same time this process of reconstruction. In the latter, on the other hand, the reader is given what is already reconsructed. In the letter to the privileged man Marlow explains his manner of telling the story in the following words :

> I put it down here for you as though I had been an eyewitness. My information was fragmentary, but I've fitted pieces together, and there is enough of them to make an intelligible picture. (208)

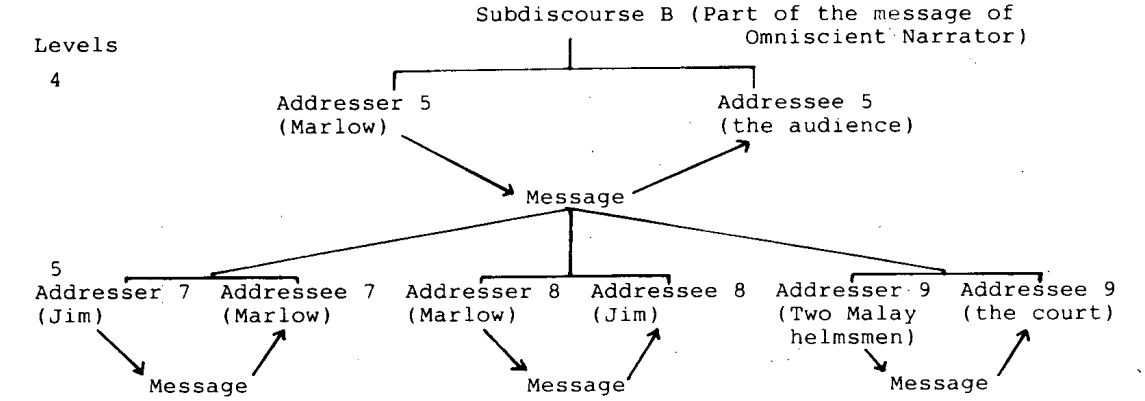
As if in defiance of his limitedness, he expresses here his intention of making an eyewitness report. Like an imaginative historian recon-

structing the past from documents, he seems to be confident that he will compose an "intelligible" narrative out of the "fragmentary" information. To ensure its intelligibility, he begins by announcing the motif of the episode of Jim's end : "You must admit that it is romantic beyond the wildest dreams of his boyhood, and yet there is to my mind a sort of profound and terrifying logic in it" (208), and closes his tale elegically : "And that's the end. He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic. Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success!" (253) As far as this episode is concerned, Marlow is explicit in his interpretation. Jim fails because of his romanticism and dies a romantic. He is destined to be destroyed by Brown who is, according to Michael P. Jones, "the assassin of all that is romantic, all that is ideal in human nature."[3] In this episode Marlow is closer to the omniscient narrator in his range of knowledge, in his more orderly manner of narration, and in his explicit interpretation. Though he always retains much of the subjective, sympathetic tone, his narrative stance, as he changes into a documentary writer, then into a historian, becomes less remarkable compared with the original one which is intended to be distinctively different from, or almost opposed to, that of the omniscient narrator. Perhaps Marlow wanders less than before in his quest.

The principle of following the chronological order is also working in the more complicated *Patna* part. To see its working, I would like to take up the sequence from Chapter 7 to 11, where Marlow's narrative roughly follows the chronological order of the *Patna* incident. The discourse structure of Marlow's narrative in these five chapters can be shown as in Fig. 2.

Marlow's narrative present is an evening talk at the Malabar

Fig. 2



House, which begins in Chapter 7 and in which he hears out Jim's rehearsal of the *Patna* affair. The text consists of an interlacing of remarks made by Marlow directly to the listeners about the situation of the interview and the appearance and demeanour of Jim, reports of what Jim says to him and his responses to Jim, and thoughts or comments addressed to the audience. Among these there is inserted a report of the testimony by the two Malay helmsmen in court, which involves a short time shift.

The greater part of the text is devoted to Jim's own story of the *Patna* incident from the moment of his conviction that the bulkhead of the ship would go at once to the scene on the open boat in the sea where he sat apart from the other officers. His story begins just where the first narrator breaks off in Chaper 4, which means that here he is at last allowed to tell his version of the crucial part of the *Patna* story in full. His first attempt to tell it failed, as we have seen in (3) above, partly because the first narrator refused to convey all of his testimony, and partly because he himself despaired of communicating his truth to others. In the privacy of his interview with Marlow, he makes another attempt, and this time, the first person version of the *Patna* story is at last conveyed to the reader-with at least two discourse levels' remove, that is, with enough distance to objectify it. This

story is told according to the chronological order of the incident. Even the digression of the Malays' testimony fits this order. It makes up for the deficient first person view, by telling that while the officers were struggling for flight and Jim standing dazed, they stuck to the helm, never thinking of leaving without an order. The short time shift from the Malabar House interview to the court scene may be a little confusing, but if we divide the discourse level 5 into two sublevels, the discourse act level, or the level of who is talking to whom and where, and the message level, or the level of what is talked about, we find the message level of the discourse remains in the same chronological order with that of Jim's discourse.

At the same time, another chronological sequence is going on. It is what I mentioned above as Marlow's narrative present, that is, the sequence of the interview at the Malabar House. This sequence is part of the sequence which begins in Chapter 5 with Marlow's first glimpse of Jim in front of the harbour office and ends in Chapter 35 with his last view of him. The account of his chance meetings with the refugees from Patusan and with Gentleman Brown given in his letter serves as the epilogue to this sequence. The earlier part of this sequence, given in Chapters 5 and 6, which tells how it happened that he invited the young man to dinner and became "the receptacle" of his confession, may be regarded as the apologetical prologue to Jim's talk by the conscientious narrator. It is needless to add that the whole sequence is the frame to Jim's story. This frame, however, does not just encase the main story, but it is intertwined with it. It is another main story, the story of Marlow's involvement with a young man who, unlike Marlow, failed, and yet "whose youth [resembled] [his] youth" (32). He gets so concerned about him that he takes the trouble to become the arranger of his affairs and help him with new opportu-

nities.

We may ascribe the complicatedness of Marlow's narrative to this feat of telling two stories belonging to different chronological sequences at a time. The dual time narrative comes to a temporary end in Chapter 13 when the story of the *Patna* affair is all told, and begins again in Chapter 24 with Marlow's report of his visit to Patusan. He tells Jim's success story at the same time as the story of his visit. If this dual time narrative is less complicated than the former one, it is because at the time of the visit Marlow is no longer so deeply concerned about Jim's fate, as well as because he tries to be more straightforward, taking account of the audience' ignorance. Jim has achieved success, like a storybook hero. "In many ways his achievements are reenactments of his youthful fantasies aboard the training ship early in the novel."[4] In Patusan Jim has succeeded in "rewriting his past as a success story."[5] As an advocate of Jim, Marlow feels happy and comfortable hearing and later reporting his success story, though not without some concern and pity for the young man's loneliness in his seclusion. The story of his visit is the story of the process of the reconstruction of the success story. During Jim's rehearsal of the *Patna* incident, on the other hand, Marlow's commitment with Jim's predicament is such that the reheasal does not always remain a one-sided talk to a quiet sympathetic listener, but often turns into an exchange of tart remarks.

At the very first glance, he recognized in the young man in white "the kind of fellow you would . . . leave in charge of the deck" (27). But when he found that this young man who seemed to be the right sort had committed an act which is inexcusable according to the simple sailor's code of fidelity, obedience, and courage in which he believed, he felt himself seriously unsettled in his self-confidence as an

experienced seaman. It is almost solely for his own sake that he "wished to find some shadow of an excuse for that young fellow" (32). This defector from "an obscure body of men held together by community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct" (31) "had reached the secret sensibility of [his] egoism" (93). It is crucial for Marlow's self esteem to know every circumstance of the desertion of the *Patna* and find out whether there is anything to be extenuated about Jim's act. But if he should find something that would enable him to tolerate it, would he able to believe in "the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (31)? Wouldn't the sovereignty then prove to be illusory? As if to defend himself against being swayed by his original partiality to Jim and unsettled out of his customary ways of thought, Marlow often turns into a severe examiner and, catching Jim in an evasion, makes a scathing retort. With all his intention to remain firm, he is not a little disturbed by Jim's repeated challenge, "What would *you* have done?" and feels himself inclined to accept Jim's interpretation of himself that he is an essentially dependable young man who was only "taken unawares" by "a directing spirit of perdition" (19) and who is courageous enough to face the consequences of his act and "wait for another chance" (81). He expresses his impatience of Jim's unsettling influence in the following words :

> Don't you see what I mean by the solidarity of the craft? I was aggrieved against him, as though he had cheated me—me!—of a splendid opportunity to keep up the illusion of my beginnings, as though he had robbed our common life of the last spark of its glamour. (80)

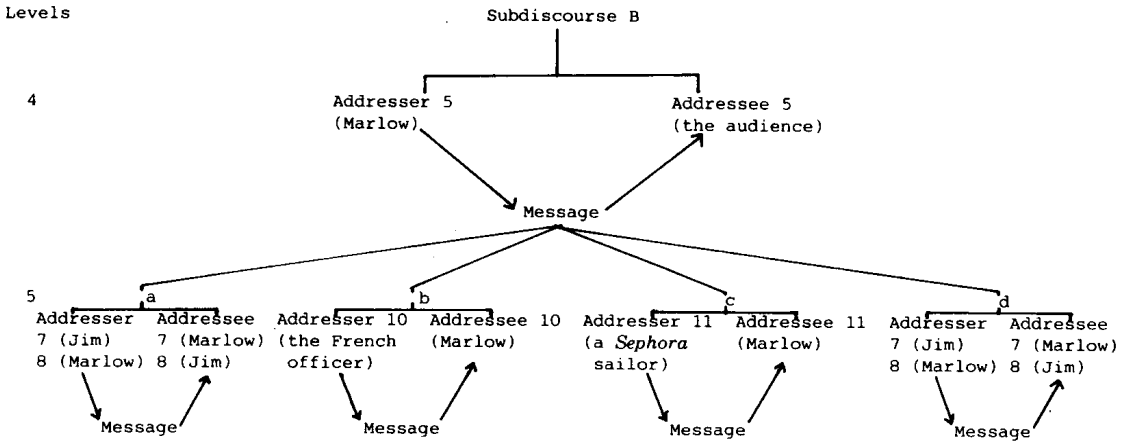
During the interview with Jim, Marlow vacillates between for and against Jim. He goes this way and that in his quest for the right judgment of Jim's act. It is this ambivalence which incites at one time a sharp retort and at another such an exalted outburst as, "He was a youngster of sort you like to see about you ; of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been . . ." (78), and which makes the story of Marow's involvement with Jim dramatic and ambiguous. The ambivalence still remains unsolved after he hears Jim out, but he makes up his mind to help him in some way or other out of pity and concern for this "horrible bungler" (95) with all too human weaknesses. In Chapters 14—23, Marlow gives a fairly detailed account of several attempts of help on his side and Jim's retreat "in good order towards the rising sun," as he throws up one job after another, until he and Stein send him off to Patusan to let him try another chance under "a totally new set of conditions for his imaginative faculty to work upon" (133). With a few time shifts, such as the anticipation of Jim's success in Patusan before the account of his departure, the narrative of this section mostly follows the single time sequence of events.

The intertwining of stories belonging to different chronological sequences, however, is not the only factor that brings about the complication of Marlow's narrative. The narrative follows another principle as well ; the principle of association, or that-reminds-me-of-this way of changing the topic of discourse. This is, in fact, the main factor which creates the impression that Marlow's talk is so casual as to seem to lead nowhere. But he does not by any means indulge himself in random association. I would like to see the principle of association woking in the sequence immediately after the one I have taken up in this section.

(5)

The discourse structure of the sequence from Chapter 12 to 13 can be roughly shown as in Fig. 3. To save space, I have compressed the conversation between Marlow and Jim in one branch, and put the marks *a*~*d* on the subdiscourses for convenience of reference. Marlow goes on with his narration, reporting the sudiscoures *a*~*d* in this order.

Fig. 3



When the narrative proceeds from the subdiscourse *a* to *b*, there occurs the same kind of split of a discourse level that happens in the preceding sequence when the narrative digresses into the testimony by the Malays. The message level of this subdiscourse remains in the same chronological order with that of the preceding subdiscourse, while the discourse act level shifts in person, time, and place. Chapter 12 begins with Jim's words presenting "the proofs" which convinced him of the instant sinking of the *Patna* immediately after the squall. Jim says he heard faint shouts for help and saw the lights of the ship gone. The shouts have turned out to be Jim's hallucination, but the disappearance of the lights remains a mystery. In order to seek a reasonable explanation for this mystery, the narrative switches from

the interview scene to the court investigation—a very short time shift —and finds it in Brierly's explanation.

This explanation is such a one as to support Jim's contention that he had a good and honourable intention, but was only cheated by the fate. Then Marlow proceeds to tell what really happened to the ship after it had been given up for lost and how it was towed to Aden by a French gunboat. He refers to the written report of her commander produced to the court and a remark by one of her officers as the sources of information. He does not forget to add the circumstantial account of the chance meeting with the officer, which took place years after the interview with Jim. In this way, in one expository paragraph, Marlow leads the listeners from one interview to another, quite naturally, but nevertheless suddenly enough ; naturally, because the exposition follows the chronological order of the *Patna* story : suddenly, because the latter interview which seems to be mentioned casually in a dependent clause, just in order to confirm a piece of information by an eyewitness' voice, is found to have taken over the whole place and become the narrative present before we are aware. Unlike the short digression of the testimony of the Malays, this "digression" occupies a great part of the two chapters.

When the narrative moves from the subdiscourse *b* to *c*, it does not follow the chronological priciple, but the principle of association. The interview ended with the French officer's decisive judgment on Jim's predicament ; "What life may be worth when . . . when the honour is gone [?] " (90) Marlow was left disconcerted, for he had been inclined to take a lenient view on Jim. He sat down again "discouraged about Jim's case" (91). He tells the listeners how he had recently seen Jim working as water-clerk. This is a short flash-forward along the sequence of the story of Marlow's involvement with

Jim. By way of illustrating how the life of a water-clerk is "a mode of life · · · barren of consolation" (*ibid.*), he introduces Bob Stanton who once followed the business of an insurance canvasser which is, according to Marlow, the only business worse than that of a water-clerk, and reports the eyewiness account by one of the *Sephora* sailors of his somewhat comical, but courageous enough death in the wreck of the ship. This story of Bob Stanton does not belong to any time sequence that has hitherto been introduced. Bob Stanton is mentioned because Jim's situation as a water-clerk reminds Marlow of the man who was once similarly—pehaps worse—situated ; through association by similarity. When the little comical man who can let himself be laughed at feels his soul "shrivelled down to the size of a parched pea after a week of that work" (92), how can Jim, ever craving for glamour, remain satisfied with "toiling without honour like a costermonger's donkey" (ibid.)?

In the description of this funny little man, the episode of his heroic death seems somewhat irrelevant at first. It is as casually introduced as if it were just to identify the man :

> Little Bob Stanton—*Charley here* [apparently one of Marlow's audience] *knew him well*—had gone through that experince. *The same* who got drowned afterwards trying to save a lady's maid in the *Sephora* disaster. A case of collision on a hazy morning off Spanish coast, *you may remember.* (91. My italics, except *Sephora.)*

When the tale of the *Sephora* man is over, we are struck with another similarity in situation between Jim and Bob Stanton, and also with a contrast (which is corollary of similarity). Both men were confronted

with an imminent sinking of the ship for which they served as chief mate : one, an unpretentious chap, went back to the ship and got drowned in a vain attempt to save a panic-stricken woman too big for him ; the other, a young man who would be a hero, found himself in the same boat with the other officers who had shamelessly deserted the ship with its "human cargo". This similarity and contrast reminds us of other similarly situated people ; the French lieutenant and the Malays who stayed for thirty hours on board the deserted ship which might sink at any moment.

Association of the same kind occurs almost every time a person is introduced with his idiosyncratic talk and/or with his particular episode. At first he seems to be referred to as a source of information, or as an instance, and his episode, for the sake of indentification and verisimilitude. In many cases, as in the case of the French lieutenant or the two Malays, the information he furnishes makes up for a gap in Marlow's store of information and enables him to tell a many-sided and therefore, more objective story about Jim. At the same time the episode itself tends to stand out and be associated with some other part of Jim's story and with other people's episodes, because of the similarity of the situation. An episode, like that of Bob Stanton, which is brought in by association to be compared to a particular phase of Jim, is essentially time-free, for it does not fit in with any of the chronological sequences consistently followed in the narrative. Likewise, an episode which is originally introduced for the sake of identification and verisimiilitude, when it is associated with Jim's case and other episodes, easily detaches itself from the chronological context and becomes time-free, all the more easily because the introduction of the episode has involved some time shift.

The detached episodes then stand side by side in "thematic

apposition", if we quote Ian Watt's term for Conrad's technique of juxtaposing episodes in thematic sequence.[6] J. Hillis Miller describes the achronological arrangement of episodes as "a simultaneous set of echoing episodes spread out spatially like villages or mountain peaks on a map."[7] The arrangement of the subdiscourses in Fig. 3 in fan shape is relevant to this description. While the alphabetical alignment from left to right corresponds to the chronological progression of Marlow's narration, the subdiscourses, which belongs to different chronologies juxtapose with each other literally on the same level or "simultaneously", allowing the reader to go back and forth ; sub-discourses "echo" each other. If the whole discourse of Marlow is diagramed likewise, it will be seen that the reader has a wide range of subdiscourses to go across.

In his frequent digressions into gossip-like episodes, some by association, some, an apologetical or explanatory digression, Marlow is, as it were, ruminating on Jim's case again and again from one viewpoint after another. Following his devious rumination, the reader has to go backward and forward from one episode to another and gradually acquire multiple viewpoints for interpreting Jim. For instance, when Marlow's narrative moves from the subdiscourse *c* to *d*, and returns to his after-dinner talk with Jim (this time, Marlow resumes the broken thread of the story in a conventional storyteller's way, that is, leading the listeners kindly over a passage of time), the reader can no longer regard Jim as an essentially dependable but unhappy young man that he may have appeared to him at the end of Chapter 11.

It is to be remarked here that Marlow himself did not have that different opinion of Jim at the time of the interview. It is in the course of the yarn that he has come to have it. To quote once more Ian Watt's

words, Marlow's narrative is "a new and intensely committed venture by Marlow at understanding and conveying the full meaning of Jim's story." The word "new" implies "old". Up to the time of this particular talk, he must have tried on every occasion to talk about and understand Jim ; the meeting with the French officer and the consultation with Stein are among these occasions. The first thoroughgoing attempt was the long talk with Jim. Going over the *Patna* incident with Jim, he tried, together with Jim or separately for himself, to interpret the meaning of Jim's act, That was the beginning of the quest for the "whole story". The story of his involvement with Jim, then, is in large part the story of his longtime quest.

The materials of Marlow's tale to the after-dinner audience are all that have been gathered during his quest. They consist of what he saw, heard, felt, and thought about Jim in the course of a long period of time ; in brief, all he remembers about Jim. In his narration, he rearranges or "edits" the remembered materials, so that, while telling a biographical story complete with well-founded details, he can go over anew his several attempts of interpretation, putting this and that together when prompted by association, to find a definite interpretation. This editing process is what I called above "the making process". But has the "whole story" been told?

(6)

Marlow sets to his task of telling and interpreting Jim's story with all the resources available to him as an unprivileged individual. Being well aware of his limitedness, he sets about it very conscientiously. Perhaps because of his conscientiousness, he does not arrive at a definite interpretation. He oscillates from one interpretation to another. Moreover, the way he arranges episodes so as to be

detachable from their contexts makes it possible for them to rearrange themselves and offer another interpretation to the reader. In so far as he does not offer a definite interpretation, he may not be a reliable narrator. But he is a narrator with a strong sense of responsiblity. He takes upon himself a difficult task of telling the "whole story" of another man and does his most to achieve it. And the story he tells is, after all, about responsibility of an individual. Northrop Frye refers to *Lord Jim* as a work illustrating the phase of most sincere, explicit realism.[8] If so, Marlow the narrator is, I think, an exponent of individualism belonging to the age of realism. But at the same time, it seems predictive of an imminent post-Freudian age when one can no longer be wholly responsible for oneself, that after all Marlow cannot determine how far Jim is responsible for his two failures. The imperfect frame that relativises Marlow's ambiguous narrative reinforces this impression.

Notes :

1. Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : Univ. of California Press, 1979), p. 297.
2. Keiko Marukawa, "On Marlow's Narrative in *Lond Jim* −1−," *The Journal of the Faculty of General Education of Sapporo University*, No. 27 (Sept. 1985), pp. 91−2.
3. Michael P. Jones, *Conrad's Heroism* : *A Paradise Lost*, Studies in Modern Lit., No. 43 (Ann Arbor, Mich. : UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 98.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 93
5. Jacques A. Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad* : *The Major Phase* (Cambridge : Combridge Univ. Press, 1978), p. 90.
6. Ian Watt, p. 280, pp, 285−86.
7. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* : *Seven English Novels* (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 35.
8. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* : *Four Essays* (Princeton : Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 237.